Two Loves
November 13, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 121
Matthew 22:34–40
Matthew 25:31–46

"As you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me."
Matthew 25:40 (NRSV)

Descartes was mistaken; "Cogito ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am." Nonsense. "Amo ergo sum"—I love, therefore I am." I believe that. I believe it is better not to live than not to love.

William Sloane Coffin
Credo

Your love is a mystery and an amazing gift of grace to us, O God. Startle us again with that love, and open our hearts and our minds to your invitation to find the meaning of our lives by loving as you love, even, particularly, "the least of these, your family." Amen.

Perhaps you knew, but I didn't until last week, that the standard keyboard layout—for typewriters, computers, Blackberries, iPhones, and Droids—has a name. It's called QWERTY for the first six letters on the top left-hand side. It was established by Christopher Sholes in 1873 and adapted by the Remington Typewriter Company, and we've been using it—some say we've been stuck with it—ever since. The arrangement is so that letters most frequently used are in some kind of helpful relationship to one another. Not unusual for people my age, I never learned to type properly. I use the hunt-and-peck method. I have an iPhone, and I love it. But when I'm answering emails, I spend at least as much time correcting my mistakes as I do typing. One error that happens over and over again is that I hit "i" when I mean "o" and "o" when I mean "i," so "for" is often "fir," and when I mean "live," it comes out "love," and when I mean "love," it comes out "live." It's a nuisance. I do it all the time, but every time I smile because in that small error is a powerful idea. In fact, in that conflation of love for live is the very essence of Christianity.

There comes a time for summing up. For Jesus it was the time immediately prior to the last week of his life, the days immediately before his entry into

Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and the events that led to his death five days later. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is in the twenty-fifth chapter: three stories, or parables.

The first is about ten bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. Five run out of oil for their lamps and fall asleep and miss the groom when he arrives. Five have brought extra oil and so are awake and alert when the bridegroom arrives. “Stay awake, be alert,” Jesus says.

The second story is about a man going on a journey who entrusts the management of his money to three servants while he is away. One hides the money in the ground. Two invest the money, at some risk, but receive a nice return on their investment. When the man returns, he rewards the two who invested and is very unhappy with the one who buried the money in the ground. The lesson is responsibility, the responsible use of resources: money, but also energy, imagination, passion—the responsible use or investment of life itself.

The third and final story, the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples before he and they are swept up in the tumultuous events of Holy Week, is about the last judgment and what he ultimately wanted from them and wants from us.

All the nations are there. The king separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep are on the right, goats on the left. He addresses the sheep: “When I was hungry you gave me food; when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you clothed me; sick and you took care of me; in prison and you visited me.” The sheep are surprised. “We don’t remember doing any of those things for you. In fact, we’re sure we didn’t.” The King says, “When you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The same exchange happens with the goats—in reverse: “I was hungry and you gave me no food; thirsty and you gave me no drink; stranger, naked, sick, and in prison and you did nothing.” The goats are as perplexed as the sheep. “We don’t remember anything like that. If we had known it was you, we would have acted very differently.” The verdict: “Truly, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

Some interpreters scramble to defuse this explosive story and explain it away. Surely it’s not that simple. Surely God wants something more from us. Where is the theology in that? Where is the church? Where, in fact, is religion at all?

There is nothing in there about being baptized, being a Baptist or Catholic or Presbyterian, nothing about which creed is true, not even anything about sex.

In a powerful sermon, Fred Craddock, distinguished and respected, now-retired professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, said, "Now here is the question. How did you respond to human need? That's it. That's the question. . . . When everything is over and the streets have been rolled up, when all the switches have been thrown, when everything we have been doing has been done for the last time, the Creator or Judge will call the world to account with one question: 'How did you respond to human need?'" (*Collected Sermons,* pp.96–97).

Does that mean that it doesn't matter what you believe, that theology and creeds don't matter? That the church doesn't matter? Not at all. It matters a great deal what you believe. The Christian enterprise was only a century or so old when it became apparent that someone needed to write down its basic beliefs. And the church—the church is the institution by which Christianity's basic beliefs are put into action in the world. But yes, this last story Jesus told is about basic, fundamental, personal things, about what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a Christian church.

Elaine Pagels, who teaches religion at Princeton University, has thought about that a lot and written a very helpful book, *Beyond Belief*—i.e., Christianity is more than a set of beliefs, "beyond belief." She tells a powerful story of how she came to that realization. She and her husband were told that their two-and-a-half-year-old son had a fatal illness. Doctors told them he had a few months, maybe a few years to live.

Not long after that Pagels was on her morning run on a cold February Sunday in Manhattan and stepped into the vestibule of a church to get warm. She is a scholar of religion but at that point was not a church person. In fact, she wasn't at all sure what the church had to do with Christianity. I have always been moved by her story.

"I had not been to church in a long time. I was startled by my response to the worship in progress, the soaring harmonies of the choir, and the priest, a woman in bright gold and white vestments, proclaiming the prayers in a clear resonant voice. As I stood watching, a thought came to me: Here is a family that knows how to face death."

It is hard to imagine anything more intense than that young mother, facing the suffering and death of her child. The church took her in. She returned to that church, attended worship and a small group that met on weekdays where her defenses fell and she exposed a storm of grief, gathered energy and resolve to face what was coming.

She reflected, “Here was a place to weep without imposing tears on a child; here was a heterogeneous community that gathered to sing, celebrate, and acknowledge common needs and to deal with what we cannot control or imagine” (p. 4).

Pagels is a fine scholar, a historian of religion. Her experience with Christianity and the church, the community that knew how to help her with her grief, was “beyond belief.” And she found herself asking “how being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs.” She’s a scholar, so she appreciates the intellectual project of thinking through what we believe about God, humankind, life and death. She would be the last person to suggest that Christianity is not about the life of the mind. But she does wonder how Christianity has become exclusively about accepting a list of ideas to be true, elevating doctrine to the place of final criteria of faith. How, she asks, did a notion of radical love (as lived and taught by Jesus) become a set of theological propositions about which Christian people fight and argue, excommunicate one another, walk away from one another and start a new, purer, truer church?

The historian in her went to work, and she concluded that what was so compelling about early Christianity was not its theology but its very public, visible, unique, and radical love.

Christians attracted a lot of attention in the second century by doing things like contributing money voluntarily to support orphans, who were routinely abandoned on the streets and garbage dumps (p. 7).

The ancient world had never seen anything like it. It was a dreadful Roman custom: If a newborn was not wanted, the baby was “cast out,” with no repercussions, simply abandoned in the street or garbage dump. Sometimes those babies were picked up and raised to be slaves. Sometimes, often, they died of exposure. The early Christians did the most amazing thing. Because of what they believed about God—that God was love and expected them to love; that human beings had value because they were created in God’s image—they picked up the abandoned babies and adopted them.

Pagels discovered that Christian groups brought food and medicine to prisoners. Prison was not yet a punishment for criminal activity; prisoners were almost exclusively prisoners of war, hostages to be used as bargaining chips or turned into slave labor. Christians treated them like human beings.

Christians, Pagels, discovered, even bought coffins and dug graves for the destitute, whose bodies otherwise would simply be dumped outside the city.

And when the plague ravaged the cities and towns of the Roman Empire, the only thing people knew was to get away, avoid it. When someone exhibited plague symptoms, everybody ran, even the doctors, and very sick people were left to suffer and die alone. Christians shocked their pagan neighbors by caring for the sick and dying, the most vulnerable, risking infection and death themselves.

We cannot think about Jesus' command to attend to the "least of these"—who he said were his family, the smallest, most vulnerable—without thinking about the tragedy that came to light at Penn State University last week: accusations of sexual abuse of children by a trusted, longtime football coach and of neglect to report it to the police.

I did not attend Penn State, but I grew up in its shadow and know plenty of people who did. I was always proud of the Penn State tradition and reputation of integrity in their sports program.

What happened at Penn Sate is a sobering reminder that the welfare of little ones, defenseless ones, is sometimes not attended to, in fact, sometimes subordinated to other things—the reputation of a university, an athletic department, a legendary coach—just as we have witnessed the tragedy of a church willing to do the same thing for a very long time.

If there is anything good coming out of this whole sorry incident, it is that looking away, not reporting to police the sexual abuse of children by trusted, but predatory adults, coaches, clergy, can no longer be tolerated.

Watching how the game began yesterday, between Nebraska and Penn State, I thought that maybe this will be a turning point in the way we deal with this whole shameful matter.

The two teams and their coaches met in the middle of the field and, one by one, knelt in silence. A Nebraska coach prayed for the victims and their families. The crowd of more than 100,000 fell silent. The camera caught people of all ages with tears in their eyes (there were tears in my eyes) at the enormity of what had happened and the importance of this moment.

"The least of these," the children, are my priority, Jesus said.

In ancient Rome and throughout the empire, wherever Christian churches were established, people were compelled, amazed, attracted to this radical love, which they had never seen anywhere before. And when they inquired why these people were behaving so abnormally, the early Christians explained that their God, unlike Roman gods who were as petty and selfish as human beings, their God was a God of love who created the world out of a heart full of love, a God who loved every human being regardless of who

he or she was, a God who expected them to express that same unconditional love in the way they lived. Their Lord Jesus Christ, whose name they had taken for themselves, had reflected the teaching of his people when he said one time that if you want to inherit eternal life, if you really want to live your life to the fullest in the here and now, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” “Do this and you will live,” he said, and so that’s what they were doing.

It’s the Christian secret. God really intends to re-create the world in love. God wants a new world where people are honored, not used; where forgiveness is taken seriously, instead of the revenge and retaliation that has characterized human history with numbing consistency, responding to violence with more violence; you threaten us, we threaten you; you bomb us, we bomb you. We call it “real politic” even though it is anything but. God has another idea for creation. I’ll never forget a conversation I was in when bombs started falling on Afghanistan. A woman, a member of this congregation, a sweet and peaceful mother of five, said, “I’m all for bombing Afghanistan. But let’s bomb them with books and wood and bags of cement to build schools.” We all laughed. But it’s not a bad idea, when you think about it. For sure, bombing people doesn’t work.

God wants a new world, and God wants a new you. God wants to convert you, not to a new level of piety, although that would be a good thing. What God wants to convert you into is a lover, a lover of people, the people God has given to you to love and those who need your love.

That’s what church is for: to show God’s love to the world in every way we can think of. It’s still compelling, you know. That is why we tutor 400 youngsters and welcome the homeless poor and provide for the aging and the very young and attempt to be a helpful resource for at-risk youth and stand with the depressed and anxious and afraid. “The least of these.”

Probably no one fits that description more than urban adolescents who have to deal with an epidemic of drugs and guns. Seventy-seven Chicago Public School children were killed last year. Thirteen already this year. I went to public school for twelve years and no one ever got shot. Changing the culture of guns and violence, gangs, unemployment and dysfunctional neighborhoods will take years, but we can do what we can. Ferguson Fellows is a way to do a small but very good thing. Named to honor the memory of Dana Ferguson and her ministry and her love for children and young people, the program targets promising ninth graders in the Tutoring program and encourages them at the most vulnerable time in their journey by recognizing them: giving each a laptop computer, a backpack, and money for special school expenses along the way.

I was humbled two weeks ago, after the 11:00 service, to recognize four new Ferguson Fellows: Chazz Brickford, Diamond Collins, Diamond Jenkins, and Breyouna King and to recognize continuing Ferguson Fellows Dejah Johnson, Sharidan Rickmon, and Tushawn Trimble.

Each of them spoke briefly about their academic status, their hopes to go to college, to study medicine, law, education, and I did think, “As you did it to the least of these, my family, you did it to me.”

And there are countless individual expressions of that love that arise, quietly, inconspicuously, out of our life together. Debbie Frisch takes newborn abandoned infants into her home and her arms and loves them for the days or weeks it takes the Family Resource Network to place them in foster or adoptive homes. Debbie has taken in and cared for forty-two babies in the past seven years. Debbie says, “The babies and I fall in love with each other. The babies tell me how to care for them; it is my job to listen. They form an attachment to me that is then transferred to their permanent family. It is hard to say good-bye, but I stay in touch with many and hold them forever in my heart. I pray for each one by name every day. Some of these babies come into the world unwanted and surrounded by a great deal of angst. I love bringing them to Fourth Church. People’s faces just light up when they see them, and I think the babies soak up that positive energy.” “As you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.”

When Dr. Bernie Blauw, a member of this congregation, retired from Rush University Medical Center as a specialist in infectious diseases in 2006 (at the age of seventy-one), he went to Kumba, Cameroon, to organize and establish and serve in an AIDS clinic at a Presbyterian hospital. Now Dr. Blauw lives in Kumba six months a year, sees twenty-five HIV/AIDS patients daily, and presents HIV/AIDS training events for pastors in a country and culture where AIDS is still met with silence and shame and all too frequently ends in death. He conducts weekly conferences for hospital personnel in the latest treatment protocols. Equipment critical in diagnosis and delivery of proper medication—two blood testing machines—have been generously given to the hospital by a couple in our congregation. Frances Ntowe, a pharmacist, member of the congregation, and native of Cameroon, organized the Cameroon America AIDS Alliance in this church and raises support and money from members and friends of Fourth Church for Dr. Blauw’s work and the clinic. One of Dr. Blauw’s patients said recently, “When I come to the hospital and Dr. B sees me, he gives me such kind and special attention that I know I’m not just a number. He really cares for me.”

“As you did it to one of the least of these, my family, you did it to me.”

God created this world out of a heart full of love. God created human beings in that same love. God created you and me, loved us into our own birth,

loved us along the way of our individual journeys, loves us now. God wants us to live every day of this life we have been given, fully, deeply, passionately, joyfully, gratefully. And God sent his Son to teach us that the way to do that is to love, particularly the least of these, my family.

So do it. Don't hold back. Don't save your love for another time, another place. Give it now. Give your life and your love, which God, I am convinced, mixes up on my iPhone to remind me every day that live and love are, in God's eyes, in Jesus' words, the same thing.

William Sloane Coffin had such a way with words, nowhere more than this, my favorite:

> Descartes was mistaken; "Cogito ergo sum"—"I think, therefore I am." Nonsense. "Amo ergo sum"—I love, therefore I am." I believe that. I believe it is better not to live than not to love. (*Credo,* p. 5)

I believe it, too.

Amen.